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# Historic Preservation and the Civil Rights Movement

The author has recently completed a study on historic preservation and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The report of this study, synopsized below, is being circulated to heritage agencies to encourage the identification, preservation, and interpretation of civil rights sites. The research for this study was conducted through a combination of field work, archival research, correspondence, and presentations to national academic conferences over a two-year period from the fall of 1992 through the fall of 1994. A report was circulated for review and comment to state historic preservation offices and other interested agencies and individuals in November 1994.

*The interpretation of the material legacy of the civil rights movement has educational potential…if done well, these efforts can facilitate historical understanding of what is arguably the most important social transformation in 20th-century America.*

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This report surveys the extent to which the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s has been commemorated in the United States. It concludes that there are wide-ranging and imaginative efforts that seek to identify, preserve, and interpret historic sites associated with the modern African-American freedom struggle. These efforts, however, have been hampered by the difficulties of commemorating chapters of history that are local, recent, and controversial. These problems of selectivity are analyzed in order to facilitate incorporation of missing aspects of civil rights history into future heritage preservation projects.

In a final section of the report, the results of the survey are summarized on a state-by-state basis. The survey demonstrates that there are significant public efforts to recognize the legacy of the civil rights movement at all levels of government, from the National Park Service to state and municipal undertakings. These include new additions to the national park system, the designation of National Historic Landmarks, nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, placement of state historical markers, and the creation of local preservation districts. Interpretive efforts include county and city funding of new museums (through adaptive use of historic structures as well as new construction), the publication of guides to


*In Dallas, Texas the former home of activist Juanita J. Craft is being converted into a civil rights museum.*


*The effort to integrate the bowling alley in the corner of this South Carolina strip mall ignited the confrontation in 1968 that came to be known as the Orangeburg Massacre. It has been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.*

African-American heritage sites by state and local governments, and the erection of historical plaques. In addition to these public efforts, private non-profit organizations are also playing a significant role. Their work has ranged from commissioning memorial sculpture to establishing museums and research centers.

As impressive as these diverse efforts are in their recognition and interpretation of the civil rights legacy, what has not been commemorated is as revealing as what has been recognized. The report identifies three problems of selectivity that suggest some of the challenges of commemorating chapters of history that are locally important, recent, and controversial. If historic preservation and heritage commemoration are significant agents in the construction of public memory, at present we are remembering only parts of the civil rights story.

The first problem of selectivity could be called the challenge of local resources. Local activism is arguably the one great chapter of civil rights history that really has not received its due in terms of commemoration or scholarship, even though civil rights activity was most frequently a local undertaking. Some efforts have been made to recognize local activism. In Dallas, Texas, for example, the former home of activist Juanita J. Craft has been adaptively reused as a museum to civil rights history. This type of site may well be one of the most significant for understanding the history of the civil rights movement. The homes of local activists, many of whom were women, were "action central." They functioned as offices and meeting places, provided guest accommodations for visiting national leaders, and sometimes became targets for racist violence. Despite this and other intriguing attempts to recognize local civil rights activity, though, the general pattern has been commemoration of the dramatic events that captured national and international headlines (like the Birmingham confrontations and the Selma voting rights marches) and recognition of nationally prominent figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who has been lionized through preservation of his birthplace, his neighborhood, his assassination site, and his tomb. Paying more attention to local resources will help us remember that it was sustained local activity, often organized by women, that desegregated American cities.

A second problem of selectivity in the preservation of the civil rights legacy is the challenge of "young" resources. Much of the movement's material legacy is not yet recognized as significant because it is often vernacular architecture and its historic importance is relatively recent. The civil rights movement has left a rich material legacy consisting of places connected with organizing, demonstration, and confrontation. Sites associated with the process of organizing include churches, schools, and the homes of local leaders, as well as modern utilitarian buildings that would not normally attract the attention of historic preservationists. On the latter, one thinks of the so-called "Black Capitol of Mississippi," the Masonic Temple in Jackson, where Medgar Evers and the NAACP had offices and held meetings. Sites of protest include places of public accommodation like bus stations, the lunch counters of national chain stores, and even bowling alleys. Sites of marches are associated with state capitols, city halls, roadways, bridges, parks, and other public spaces. While many of the most visible sites of the civil rights movement are monumental civic buildings and places like college campuses and churches that tend to be well-maintained, the vernacular architecture associated with the movement is more vulnerable. At the moment, there are no

*The figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. dominates how we are commemorating the modern civil rights movement, as in the preservation of his birthplace in Atlanta.In contrast, the role of black power and black nationalism seem too controversial to remember.*

systematic efforts underway anywhere in the country simply to survey buildings or sites associated with the civil rights movement, even though it represents the nation's most significant social revolution in the 20th century.

A third problem of selectivity is the challenge of controversial history. Where is black power? Where are the Black Panthers? Where is Malcolm X? At the moment, these seem to be chapters of the African-American freedom struggle that are too difficult or too dangerous to commemorate. To be sure, the life and work of Malcolm X have received some commemoration through historical markers placed at the sites of childhood homes in Omaha, Nebraska and Lansing, Michigan. In addition parks, schools, mosques, and streets have been named for him in several northern cities. But it is the figure of Martin Luther King who dominates how we are remembering the 1950s and 1960s, probably because Dr. King's philosophy fits the model for social change that the majority finds congenial. Non-violent means, the vocabulary of Christian love, and integrationist goals are easier for public agencies to commemorate than sites associated with violence, armed resistance, and racial separation. The subject of black power raises the related issue of white resistance. Should historic white resistance to the civil rights movement be identified in some fashion? From one perspective it is an appalling and fearsome question that perhaps should not even be asked. But from the perspective of using material culture to tell the full story of the civil rights movement, white resistance is as much a missing chapter as black power.

To summarize, selectivity remains a problem despite the truly impressive and imaginative efforts that recognize and interpret the civil rights movement through commemorative architecture and diverse preservation strategies. Some of the difficulty in presenting controversial history is rooted in the challenges of assessing the civil rights movement after 1965 or so, when the story becomes more complicated: when the heroes, victims, and villains become harder to define; when violence seems to take on some utility; when we as a society lose consensus about the meaning of the movement and what the future should hold. It becomes easier to leave out black separatism and white backlash, for example, and to follow the story only through the end of Dr. King's life in 1968. The problem of selectivity is also rooted in the contemporary relevance of these historical issues. Black separatism continues to be a major news story and a subject of public discussion that inflames passions, as does white racism. As a result, it is harder to put the subjects on text panels at museums, even though the timeliness of the issues might be the best argument for trying to locate them in broad context and historical perspective.

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Photos by the author.